

Learning Languages via Social Networking Sites

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Pedagogical Considerations and Opportunities for Teaching and Learning on the Web

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Chapter 1

Learning Languages via Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study of seven learners who logged their experiences on the language learning social networking site Livemocha over a period of three months. The features of the site are described and the likelihood of their future success is considered. The learners were introduced to the Social Networking Site (SNS) and asked to learn a language on the site. They were positive about two aspects of the site: the immediate peer-feedback available and the ability to converse synchronously and asynchronously with native speakers of their target language. However, there was universal criticism of the “word-list”-based language learning materials, and several participants complained about the regular cyber-flirting they encountered. Other aspects of the site including accessibility, ease of use, syllabus, activities, and relationships with other members are also considered. The potential for integrating some of the features of SNSs for language learning into the Higher Education (HE) curriculum and the implications of this for educators are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In language teaching there has been a long tradition of encouraging learners to use the target language to communicate with others, in their own time. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) supports this approach, by emphasising the interdependence of

individuals and the importance of group processes in the co-construction of knowledge.

Originally one of the ways that teachers advocated collaborative language learning was through penpalling, and then, with the advent of the internet, through keypalling (Choi & Nesi, 1999). Most recently social networking sites (SNSs) such as Livemocha have sprung up, offering learners the opportunity to practise the target language with other members of the online community. In

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order for foreign language educators to evaluate and harness the potential of these sites it would be useful for them to know more about how they work.

Integrating SNSs into the classroom faces some practical obstacles including the lack of control that many tutors have over the curricula, and the fact that language courses are often taught by a number of tutors who do not necessarily coordinate their efforts to ensure a degree of consistency. In addition to this there are wider questions which create tensions (JISC, 2009) including the lack of clear policies if a site that a course is reliant on ceases to operate, the lack of experienced learning technologists who have an understanding of Web 2.0 technologies, and the technical difficulties that face those with institutional support responsibilities to integrate tools which have been developed and maintained externally (Conole & Alevizou 2010, p.84). A further obstacle is the fact that the majority of language classes are introductory, and although SNS messages might sometimes seem superficial, they require advanced pragmatic knowledge that beginners are likely to lack (Furman et al., 2007).

McLaughlin and Lee (2008) propose a dynamic student-led 'Pedagogy 2.0' curriculum, but institutional constraints make such flexibility problematic. Pedagogy 2.0 has emerged from the Web 2.0 movement and its innovative use of social software tools which offer opportunities for people to connect, share and discuss ideas (Conole & Alevizou, p10) and to challenge previous centralized models of learning. McLaughlin and Lee (2008) define Pedagogy 2.0 as integrating "Web 2.0 tools that support knowledge sharing, peer-to-peer networking, and access to a global audience with socioconstructivist learning approaches to facilitate greater learner autonomy, agency, and personalization". The approach leads to individual learner empowerment (Rogers et al. 2007; Sims 2006; Sheely 2006) and the development of learners' Personal Learning Environments (PLEs).

Godwin Jones (2005, p.9) has referred to SNSs as "disruptive technologies" in that they allow for

new and different ways of doing familiar tasks". They have the potential to transform language learning by offering synchronous and asynchronous interaction, and speaking, writing, reading and listening activities at a time and place of learners' own choosing (McBride, 2009). Although SNS contact is not face-to-face it is authentic communication with native speakers, something which was previously difficult to replicate in the language classroom. The peer-review features and the oral practice opportunities afforded by SNSs have been praised by users such as the bloggers, 'Street-Smart Language Learning' (2010) and 'Fluent in 3 months' (2010). Lloyd (2012) has also suggested that platforms such as these, with the collaboration of tutors, could be utilised to bridge the gap between formal and informal language learning.

A recent report (Johnson et al., 2010) identified the following three trends as key drivers of technology adoption in HE between 2010 and 2015:

- The abundance of online resources and relationships, inviting a rethink of the educators' role
- An increased emphasis on ubiquitous, just-in-time, augmented, personalised and informal learning
- Greater collaboration between students

These predictions map across to features of SNSs for language learning, as can be seen from the overview of Livemocha.com provided below, and this suggests that more widespread adoption of SNSs for language learning is about to take place.

The Affordances of SNSs for Language Learning

Attitudes towards the use of SNSs for learning in HE in the UK can be summarised by the findings of a recent report (JISC, 2009):

Yet technology-enhanced learning remains a source of concern for institutions. This finding may reflect the extent to which supporting such practice makes demands on institutional resources[...]. Access, especially to the internet and social software, may have increased, but this does not mean that technology is always used to its best advantage, either by teachers or learners.

This cautious approach contrasts sharply with the emergence of PLEs and ‘Pedagogy 2.0’ curriculum referred to in the introduction.

Boyd and Ellison describe SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals to:

1. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (2007, ‘Social Network Sites: a definition’)

SNS technology can be utilised in two different ways, affording learners greater or lesser control over their own learning process. On the one hand tutors can encourage learner interaction in an institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) incorporating videoconferencing software such as Skype. This approach allows tutors to maintain control over the membership of the group and to provide a structured learning environment, based on the principles of tandem learning. The effects of Skype-based tandem language learning have recently been investigated in a study by Mullen, Appel and Shanklin (2009), who replicated some of the features of SNSs with classes of students in Japan and the US, using a Moodle site they had constructed themselves. The feedback from participants was positive and the project has proved to be sustainable with criticism restricted to complaints about the time difference. Practical suggestions were made to address this, such as setting up a fixed time when all students were

available (p.113). Alternatively tutors can encourage students to register on a commercial site which allows them complete freedom to interact with any other site member. Most commercial language learning SNSs offer some free content alongside a premium or freemium feature for which registration and payment is required. The sites often include a peer review facility where students can provide feedback to learners of their own first language, and some sites incorporate an award system in the form of ‘Mochapoints’ and ‘medals’ (www.livemocha.com) or “berries” (www.busuu.com). As Orsini-Jones, Brick and Pibworth (2012) highlighted (p.53), this serves to motivate participants by rewarding them for their progress and for their peer review activities.

Livemocha as a platform for ethnographic research into relationship building and mediation has recently been investigated by Harrison and Thomas (2009, p.121). Their study found that sites such as live Livemocha ‘offer to transform language learning, by providing environments that allow new modes of active learning’ and that SNSs present opportunities to examine existing learning theories in the age of digital literacies. Brick’s (2012) study also highlighted the unique opportunity SNSs offer language learners (p.52).

Livemocha.com: An Overview

The Livemocha site was the first of its kind and remains the most popular, with over 5 million members worldwide, mostly in the 18-35 age group (Livemocha, 2010a). Livemocha members can take courses free of charge in 35 different languages, with the option to pay for premium content in some of these. Livemocha make no mention of tandem learning on their web site, but they do refer to their pedagogical principles:

If you are looking to translate a 1,000 page dissertation or write text in an ancient language, then Livemocha is not for you. But, if you are looking to gain practical, real-life language skills, Livemocha

cha is your ticket. Livemocha courses are focused on building practical conversation skills - every lesson includes speaking and writing exercises that are reviewed by native speakers. Livemocha helps you build the confidence you need to speak a new language. (Livemocha, 2010b)

The site is divided into four parts: Home, Learn, Share and Teach. In the Home section (see Figure 1) learners can keep track of their progress, view their reward points, monitor their recent activity, view the work they have submitted for peer review and access requests from other community members to review their work.

The Learn section (see Figure 2) provides a list of the courses the learner is currently taking, a section which creates flashcards based on what the student has learnt, and further sections to view

work submitted for review and for further practice. There are seven activities (Jee and Park, 2009):

1. **Learn:** Learners listen and click the right picture for vocabulary learning.
2. **Reading:** Learners read the sentence and click the right picture.
3. **Listening:** Learners listen and click the right picture.
4. **Magnet:** Learners listen and arrange words in a correct sentence.
5. **Writing:** Learners read the prompt, write an essay, and submit it to receive feedback from other anonymous users or their invited friends.
6. **Speaking:** learners record a paragraph length discourse sample and submit it for peer review.

Figure 1. Log in screen (© 2010, Livemocha. Used with permission.)

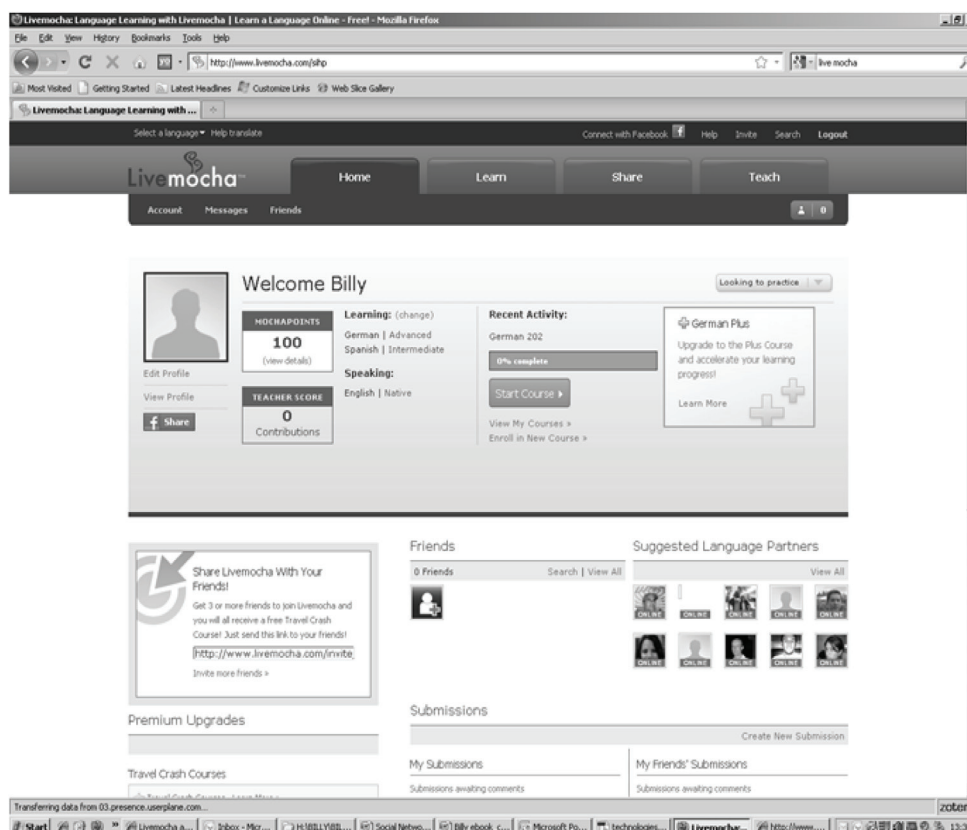
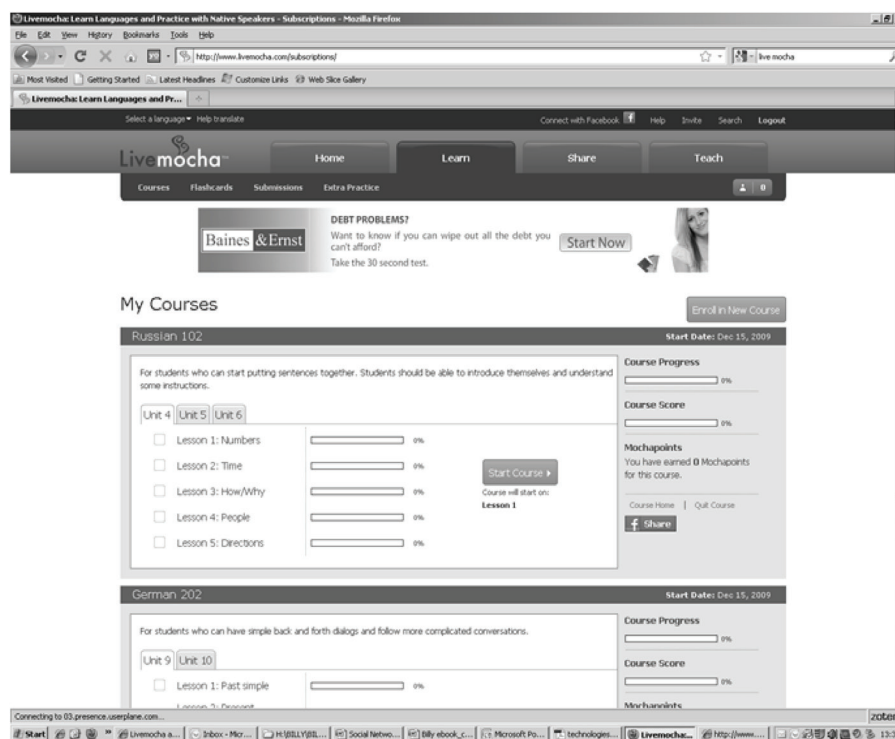


Figure 2. Learn screen (© 2010, Livemocha. Used with permission.)



7. **Dialogue:** learners practice a paragraph-length given dialogue with a partner of their choice

Jee and Park (2009) criticised the quality of the learning materials available on the site: “The instructional content in the system could benefit from guidance from second language acquisition (SLA) practitioners to improve its pedagogical design and offer a more systematic approach to effective learning”. However, they acknowledged that Livemocha learners would benefit from the authentic communicative experience with native speakers, even without the presence of a tutor. Since Jee and Park’s (2009) publication, the English language learning section of Livemocha has become part of a new collaboration with Pearson Publishing, leading to the addition of premium content called “Study English” (Livemocha, 2010).

The share section (see Figure 3) allows users to review submissions by other users and to provide feedback. It is in this section that learners are able to contribute to the community and in doing so earn Mochapoints and, eventually ‘medals’.

The Teach tab (see Figure 4) encourages users to complete their profile in anticipation of the increased functionality that will be added to the site in the near future. Few details have so far been provided, but it is suggested that those users with high Mochapoints ratings are likely to benefit through having the option to teach on the site in exchange for money or Livemocha points.

Learners are encouraged to search for other learners on the site and to make friends in much the same way as they would on other SNSs such as Facebook. This friendship is supposed to offer mutual benefits to both parties as they can provide feedback for each other’s oral or written work and communicate asynchronously, via an in-built texting tool, or synchronously, via a Voice over

Figure 3. Share screen (© 2010, Livemocha. Used with permission.)

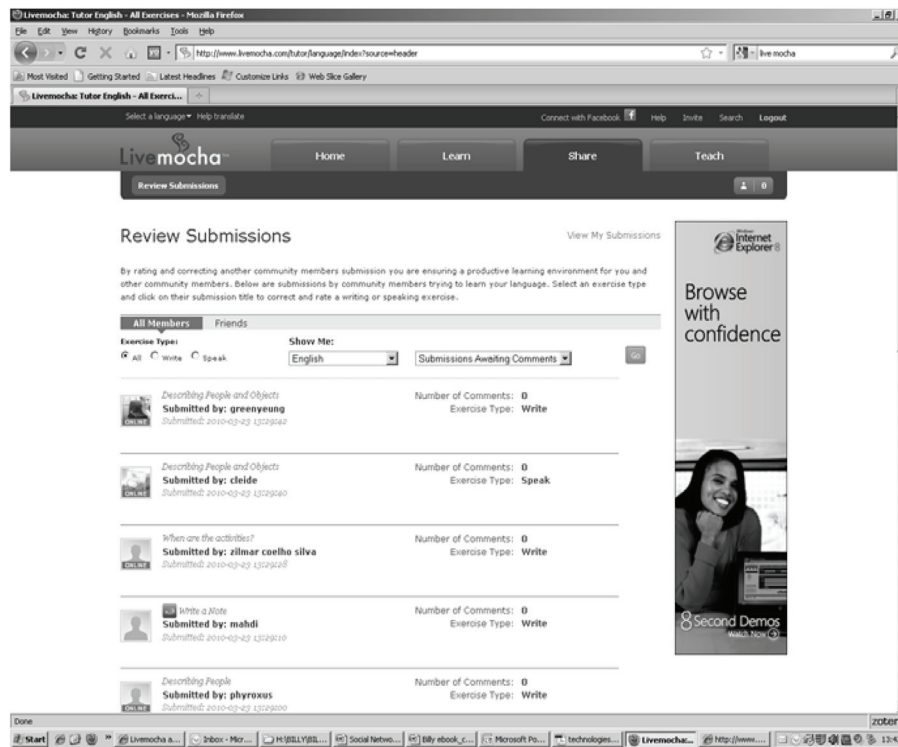
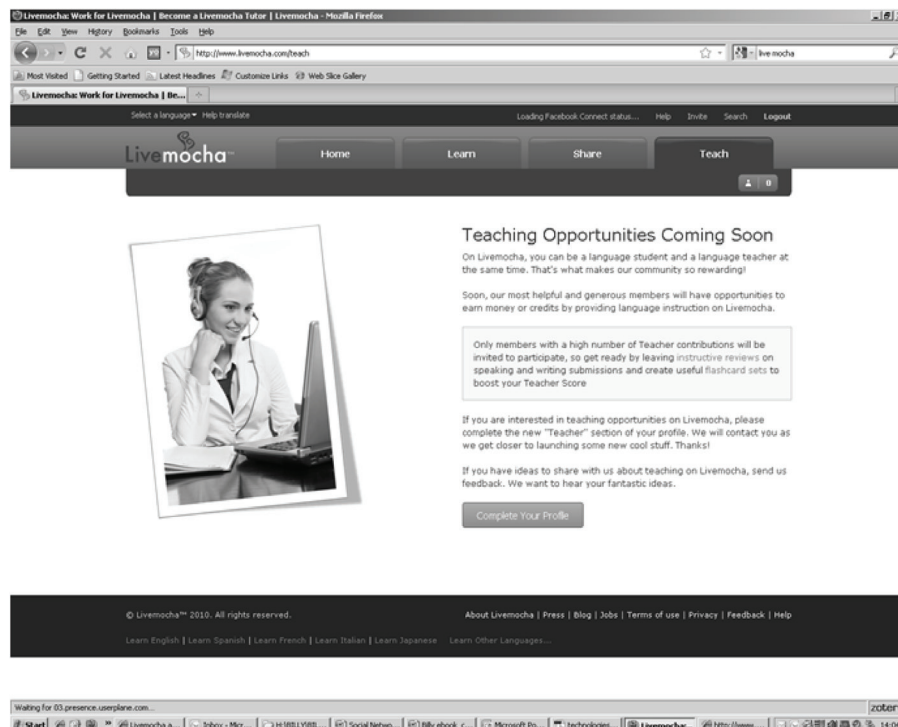


Figure 4. Teach screen (© 2010, Livemocha. Used with permission.)



Internet Protocol (VoIP) tool. There is also the possibility to use built-in video-conferencing software to communicate with friends within the site. Peer review is at the centre of the design of the site, and 'Mochapoints' are awarded to members who choose to review the written or oral submissions of other site members. 'Fluent in 3 months', a blogger who has used Livemocha, is positive about the peer review system:

The best thing would be to get to know other users and to come to a mutual agreement about helping one another.... The fact that you can find such people eager to help you within the system is a huge plus. (2010)

The Livemocha site continues to evolve and has already changed substantially since Jee and Park (2009) wrote their initial review. The company now claim to have over 6 million users worldwide with members in over 200 countries. However, there are no statistics available to indicate how many of these users are active on the site on a regular basis. One of the founders of Livemocha, Krishnan Seshadrinathan, claims that the company will be able to expand substantially and support a range of new services over the next five years, due to growth in the market for language learning as a result of globalization, immigration and travel. According to Seshadrinathan, Livemocha will become available on a variety of electronic devices, will offer 100 different languages, and will have between 30 and 50 million users (MacLure, 2009 p.10).

Research Questions

Whether Seshadrinathan's predictions are correct or not, the sheer number of people currently registered on Livemocha and numerous other SNSs for language learning suggests that they will play an important role in foreign language learning in the future. This raises a number of general questions for HE practitioners, the answers to which are likely

to be clearer over the next few years. Should we attempt to integrate such sites into the curriculum? If the answer to this question is yes, then which site should we select and what sort of guidance should we provide for learners? If the answer is no, then should we attempt to recreate some of the features of these sites in a more controlled environment such as that described by Mullen et al. (2009)? If we choose to eschew SNSs in favour of more traditional methods, then do we run the risk of learners learning languages in forums we are unfamiliar with and which we are unable to offer appropriate advice about?

The following section reports on the experiences of a sample of UK HE students who accessed Livemocha over a period of three months. By observing these students and gathering reports of their experiences using Livemocha I was able to explore the potential of SNSs as a means of providing language instruction, language support and collaborative learning opportunities within the context of a university level language programme.

The specific questions this paper seeks to answer are as follows:

How easy is the site to access and use? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the syllabus and activities available on the site? What were the reactions of the participants to the social networking element of the site?

THE STUDY

Methods

The participants were seven undergraduate learners from various L1 backgrounds who were either taking, or had taken, courses in Polish, Portuguese, Spanish (see Table 1). For the purposes of the study they were allowed to learn whichever language they wished. The study followed their interactions in the Livemocha language learning SNS, adopting a repeated measures design and

Table 1. Participants

Participant Number	Gender	Mother Tongue	Target Language(s)	Log Sheets Completed
1	Female	English	Spanish, German	20
2	Female	Spanish	French	10
3	Female	English	Spanish, Dutch	20
4	Female	Spanish	German, Japanese	20
5	Female	English	Russian, Korean	20
6	Female	Spanish	Russian	20
7	Female	English	French, Spanish	10

eliciting multiple samples from the same learners over a three month period from January to March 2010. The data was collected via log sheets (see Appendix) and meetings in which common issues were discussed.

The participants were required to fill in a log sheet each time they visited the site and were also required to attend four scheduled meetings and notes were taken as they discussed their experiences. Watts and Ebbutt (1987) have considered the advantages of group interviewing as a means of collecting data: it allows for discussions to develop, thus yielding a wider range of responses and causes minimum disruption. As recommended by Arksey & Knight, (1999 p. 76), there were always two interviewers present as a means of cross-checking and producing a more complete record. The research was confined to the free content on Livemocha rather than including the premium services, and participants were simply asked to use the site, and did not receive specific instructions to concentrate on particular features or languages. In order to familiarize students with the various functions Livemocha offers, an introductory session was held in which the various features were demonstrated and the aims of the study were explained.

The following section is a summary of the comments and evaluations collected from the participants. The combination of regular log sheets, completed immediately after they had visited Livemocha and discussions during the scheduled meetings, provided a rich variety of data covering a wide range of opinions about the site.

RESULTS

Accessibility and Ease of Use

The initial reaction to using the site was a positive one; all participants were able to set up an account and make a few friends, although Participant 1 reported difficulties in trying to work out how to remove somebody from her list of 'friends'. There were no complaints regarding access to the site. The pages were found to load quickly and the site was considered intuitive to use.

One of the participants (#3) reported that she had managed to access some of the premium content (a crash course in French for travellers, offered as a reward for recommending new members) by convincing three of her friends to sign up for the site.

Syllabus

All the participants complained about the quality of the language learning materials on the site. Participants 1, 3 and 7 complained that the Spanish materials were geared towards Latin American Spanish, which differs considerably from the Castilian Spanish which they were more familiar with. Participant 1 discovered incorrect translations in the Spanish learning materials and participant 3 criticised the syllabus, which consisted largely of the names of people and objects, rather than the common language functions normally associated with beginners' courses, for example greetings, requests and directions. This 'word list' approach is followed across all of the languages on offer.

Towards the end of the evaluation period a common complaint from all of the participants was the lack of grammar learning opportunities. None of the freely available learning activities explicitly focus on the grammar of the target language.

Activities

Four of the participants (1, 3, 4 and 7) chose to learn more than one language because this was free of charge, they did not need to invest in a text book, and they could receive almost instantaneous feedback from native speakers in the Livemocha community. However, the peer review feature also received some negative feedback; learners liked the immediacy of the responses to written and spoken submissions, but at the same time were critical of the value of corrections offered by community members. All of the participants believed that it was possible to build up a network of reliable friends to provide feedback on the site, but that this took time to achieve. The only way this is possible is by trial and error. Members need to submit written texts for review and slowly build up a network of friends whose feedback they judge to be of a high quality.

One of the key principles of tandem learning is reciprocity (Little, 2003) which means that each partner should benefit from the experience equally. This was often deemed not to be the case and participants 1, 3, and 7 speculated that the reason for this was that some members of the Livemocha community are keen to learn English from native speakers rather than developing a relationship based on the principles of tandem learning, and that the number of learners wanting to learn English far outweighs the number of English native speakers wanting to learn a foreign language.

There is as yet no facility to enable learners studying the same material to communicate with each other; Participant 3 suggested that this would be a useful addition to the site.

Throughout the survey none of the participants took advantage of the built in video-conferencing

feature although several participants commented on requests they had received to continue communicating with partners using other software such as MSN or Skype. The only reason provided to explain this was lack of familiarity with Livemocha's in-house communications software.

Participants 2, 3 and 5 also commented on how they liked the translator tool which is available within the text chat feature. This enabled them to quickly translate phrases whilst chatting to language partners in their target language.

Relationships with Other Participants

Participant 1 was the only participant who registered to improve her knowledge of a language she knew already (Spanish). She reported that she had met a learning partner on Livemocha but had then gone on to build a tandem-learning relationship with him using Skype rather than the tools available within Livemocha. She also reported that both her and her Spanish partner had become less inhibited as they got to know each other better and revealed that they were able to "laugh at each other's mistakes and attempt more challenging tasks".

However although this student had a good relationship with her learning partner, throughout the duration of the study one recurring criticism was the numerous inappropriate advances made towards the participants by community members. Participant 1, for example, reported experiencing inappropriate behaviour on her second visit to the site. This type of behaviour is known as cyber-flirting (Whitty & Gavin, 2001; Vie 2007). Apart from inquiries into their marital status and whether they had a boyfriend or not, the approaches included requests to become Facebook friends or to meet elsewhere on-line outside the parameters of the site (participant 5). None of these advances were deemed serious enough to warrant making a complaint. All participants chose to register on Livemocha using their real identity rather than a pseudonym, and four of the seven (participants 2,

4, 6 and 7) chose to upload a profile picture. These four reported a greater incidence of cyber-flirting than those who chose not to post a photograph to their profiles. It should be noted that this type of behaviour is common on SNSs generally, as Ibrahim (2008) points out.

DISCUSSION

The participants reported both negative and positive reactions to using Livemocha on a regular basis over the three month period. The most common criticism concerned the quality and relevance of the free learning materials, which were always based around a series of pictures. Some of the participants also complained about the complete lack of explicit grammar teaching on the site. Although the learning materials seem to be quite poor, it is easy to understand why both of the market leaders, Livemocha and Busuu, have taken this approach. Materials based on 'word lists' are particularly cheap to produce because the approach can be applied to all languages using the same prompts. The complete lack of grammar on the site is also one of the main criticisms made by the blogger 'Street Smart Language Learning' (2010), who reported his unsuccessful attempt to study the German case system using Livemocha, and his eventual decision to abandon Livemocha in favour of other non-SNS language learning web sites and books. 'Street Smart Language Learning' also goes on to mention that he had learnt German in the past and had hoped to review the grammar rules he had previously learnt. This proved to be impossible via Livemocha. A beginner would undoubtedly find learning grammar from Livemocha even more difficult.

Livemocha has not yet addressed the perceived weakness in the teaching of grammar on their site but their European competitor Busuu, have recently launched additional premium grammar content in collaboration with Collins publishing. The grammar guides provide explicit grammatical

explanations which integrate with the learning units.

Livemocha offers 'premium content' in conjunction with a publishing house for a monthly fee, but although one of the premium packages includes the services of a tutor, it is unclear how much weekly contact time is provided, or what the tutor's teaching qualifications may be

The cyber flirting (Whitty & Gavin, 2001; Vie 2007) referred to by several of the participants is obviously a concern for practitioners but it is by no means certain whether we should advise against registering for SNSs on this account. When students undertake a study year abroad we do not advise them to communicate only with students from their host university, and to avoid communicating with members of the wider community, for fear that they may encounter unsavoury characters with questionable motives. On the contrary, we encourage them to experience as much of the local culture as possible and expect them to use their common sense to avoid placing themselves in potentially dangerous situations. Perhaps the same philosophy should be adopted with regard to SNSs.

The comments of the two bloggers 'Street-Smart Language Learning' (2010) and 'Fluent in 3 months' (2010) concur with the findings of this study. They are both extremely critical of the free learning materials (neither comment on the premium content) but they both agree that the site offers a unique opportunity for learners to practise their oral skills with native speakers and that they facilitate almost immediate feedback. Neither of the two (male) bloggers made any reference to the cyber flirting, suggesting that this type of behaviour tends to be directed at women by men.

According to Harpercollins, (2010) 375 million people worldwide want to learn a language and the market is currently estimated to be over \$80 billion. If this is true, the likelihood is that the number of people choosing to learn languages in this way will increase. We should also expect increased functionality, options to study a wider variety of languages and the availability of services

on a wider range of electronic devices. Although Livemocha have not yet launched any apps, Busuu have made 10 languages available on both the Apple and Android platforms and more recently a Spanish app designed especially for children has also been released. This trend is likely to continue, with more languages being introduced.

There is certainly potential for SNSs for language learning to become embedded as part of language learners' PLEs once these technologies become widely accessible. Over the coming years we are likely to see an expansion in the various offers made by language learning SNSs including models that offer tutor support and the introduction of platforms aimed specifically at HE. According to the Hickens (2013), Rosetta Stone's recent merger with Livemocha will allow the company to reach a younger, less affluent demographic and to offer more personalised content by targeting heavy users which will accelerate its influence in markets outside its traditional CD-based business. This move towards greater personalisation, utilising sophisticated analytics engines chimes with one of the key drivers identified by Johnson et al (2009)

Harrison & Thomas (2009, p.118) reported that learners 'felt a certain amount of unease [...] and chose to use pseudonyms rather than their real names'. The opposite was true with the learners who took part in the project: all of them chose to use their own names rather than pseudonyms. Further research needs to be carried out in this area to establish which behaviour is typical and to investigate whether cultural factors play a role in how students choose to compose their profiles.

As mentioned previously, Mullen et al. (2009) have described another approach to creating opportunities for language learners in HE to communicate in their target languages. On the one hand this approach allowed tutors to more carefully monitor the interactions between learners and have some control over matching ability levels. They also had a degree of insurance that the learners were able to offer constructive feedback as they were university students with some experience of

language learning. There are also disadvantages to this approach, however, not least the small numbers of learners involved compared to those found on www.livemocha.com or www.busuu.com. The critical mass of learners available on-line across the globe on these two sites and numerous others ensures that there are always language learners available for members to interact with, meaning that time differences are of no consequence. On the other hand, Mullen et al's (2009) model relies on learners being available at specific times of mutual convenience.

Hybrid sites are likely to emerge combining some of the functionality of commercial SNSs with the principles of tandem learning. In response to the positive feedback from participants in the study, one such site is currently being developed at Coventry University which aims to facilitate both face-to-face and online language exchange via a Moodle web open to both Coventry University students and students from other partner universities. Learners are able to construct a profile including their Skype address and can then search within discussion forums, which are threaded according to target language, for language exchange partners. Once a learner has found a partner, they can arrange to meet up face-to-face or over the internet via Skype. Links to suitable language exchange learning materials, created at Bochum University for the eTandem project (2001), are also provided on the site along with a link to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) which serves as a point of reference for learners to estimate their levels. If learners are unable to locate a partner within the site, they are directed towards SNSs.

Another project at Coventry University (Orsini-Jones, 2013) has linked UK and Mexican students together via a Moodle web and analysed the difficulties of inter-cultural communication. Projects such as these are likely to proliferate in the near future illustrated by other similar projects (Intent, 2013). This is perhaps due in part to the maturity of the necessary technologies to facilitate such

exchanges and the influence of commercial providers providing similar opportunities to individuals.

Similar developments are likely to follow from language learning software companies. Indeed, Rosetta Stone, the US-based language learning software company, has recently launched a new platform which provides opportunities to practise speaking with native speakers (Overly, 2010).

The fact that none of the participants chose to use the web conferencing feature available within the site but chose instead to migrate to more familiar platforms cannot be easily explained. Perhaps their familiarity with tools such as Skype and MSN instant messenger prompted this, rather than a lack of confidence in the in-house product.

Stevick (1971) and Guo (2010) have both argued the importance of building motivation concepts such as immediacy and authenticity into language learning materials. SNSs offer both of these and according to Guo (2010, p.E14), “The educational language website or computer application based on motivation is a true step forward as compared with inventions of printing, computer, the Internet and their applications to human language learning”. However, it should be noted that participants reported varied experiences with regard to peer review feedback, depending on who was providing it and their level of expertise. It was also suggested that it may take time to develop a network of trusted partners within the site and that this can only be built up on a trial and error basis. ‘Street Smart Language Learning’ (2010) supports the idea that you have to develop a network of friends in whom you have confidence:

I now have a core group of tutors to whom I consistently submit such assignments to, and their feedback is phenomenal. They drill into my work to find even subtle mistakes and offer excellent explanations of what I’m doing wrong. So, while initially you may find that the feedback you get is not all that great, as you separate the wheat from the chaff you’ll eventually end up with excellent tutors.

The blogger goes on to describe Livemocha as “ingenious social engineering” because members are presented with work to correct immediately after they have had a piece of work corrected themselves. They then feel eager to reciprocate by providing good feedback for someone who has done the same for themselves.

Since UK National Student Surveys (NSS) were initiated in 2005 there has been a consistently negative response regarding feedback; according to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2009) only 57% of students considered it to be prompt and useful. Perhaps the quality of the feedback on SNSs for language learning is variable, depending on your network of friends, but it is certainly fast, often taking only a few minutes to arrive. This compares favourably with HE institutions where the turnaround time can be several weeks.

CONCLUSION

SNSs for language learning provide the opportunity, previously unavailable, for learners to practise oral skills with native speakers and to receive immediate feedback, thus justifying their designation as “disruptive technologies” (Godwin Jones, 2005, p.9). These two features are the ones which received the highest praise from the participants, as opposed to the learning materials which received universal criticism. The number of sites and the number of people joining these sites is likely to continue in the foreseeable future, even more premium content is likely to be offered and opportunities for learners to access the sites on various mobile platforms are likely to increase. In the face of ongoing cuts in HE (Atwood, 2010) and the concomitant pressures to teach more and more students with decreasing levels of resource, educators cannot afford to ignore SNSs for language learning. Tutors will also need to be made aware of SNSs, and to be trained in their use (Elliott, 2009). Further research

in this rapidly developing area is essential to enable practitioners to make informed choices with regard to their role in the curriculum.

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APPENDIX

Table 1A.

		Date:	
Session no:	Logged in at:		Logged out at:
I studied:			
I learned (can refer to 'anything', not just the language you are studying):			
I communicated with (name of language partner) by (message, text chat, voice chat, other?):			
I made mistakes with:			
I was pleased with:			
I wasn't pleased with:			
My difficulties are:			
I would like to know:			
My learning and practising plans for next time are:			